Alberta Government

Disclaimer

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of Alberta youth we spoke to at *Speak Out* forums, at the Annual *Speak Out* Conference, and through the *Speak Out* website (http://www.speakout.alberta.ca) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Government of Alberta.

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For more information please contact:

Speak Out – the Alberta Student Engagement Initiative
Alberta Education
12th Floor, 44 Capital Boulevard
10044-108 Street, Edmonton, AB T5J 5E6

Phone: (780) 422-0390
Fax: (780) 415-2481
Email: speakout@gov.ab.ca

Also available online: http://www.speakout.alberta.ca/

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# Speak Out Highlights

- The fifth Annual *Speak Out* Conference accepted a total of 230 students and 101 chaperones from 61 communities around Alberta, as well as 40 Alberta Education staff.
- During the 2012–2013 academic year, the *Speak Out* team heard from 1,544 students in 27 of the 62 school districts.
- The number of visits to the *Speak Out* website reached 28,589, with 15,118 unique visitors.
- The *Speak Out* online discussion board had 3,764 posts this year.
- @SpeakOutAB was initiated this year, with a total of 151 tweets and 197 followers.

"I LOVE SPEAK OUT! Really hope to come back next year!"*

"I really enjoyed the different session and making new friends. The guest speakers were really great too! Overall it was an amazing experience."

* This report shows all quotations from participants' contributions to *Speak Out* as originally written, with no changes to spelling, grammar or punctuation.

SPEAK OUT
ALBERTA STUDENT ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE

# Speak Out Impact

This year, *Speak Out* has enabled thousands of students to share their thoughts on education through a number of formats, including the website, *Speak Out* forums, the fifth Annual *Speak Out* Conference and the Minister's Student Advisory Council. Through these methods, student voice has been sought and used to inform policy decisions in program areas within Alberta Education, with various education stakeholders and with other ministries across the Government of Alberta. Because of the connections that stakeholders are making with *Speak Out*, students have become agents of change in their schools and communities across Alberta.

With the addition of the Taking Action pilot project, students now have the opportunity to carry out local projects to actively make a difference in their own schools and communities. This new project functions as a complement to the *Speak Out* forums, allowing students to pick an issue that comes up in a forum and brainstorm ideas on what they can do to change it.

*Speak Out* is fully aligned with the vision of *Inspiring Education* and provides opportunities for Alberta students to be engaged thinkers and ethical citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit.

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# Introduction

Since November 2008, *Speak Out* – the Alberta Student Engagement Initiative has been enabling Alberta's youth to share their experiences and ideas on education to help the Ministry understand how best to meet students' varied needs, goals and learning preferences and, in turn, strengthen Alberta's education system as a whole. Student engagement is about collaborating with students in an effort to enhance their interest in education and their passion for learning; it is about providing students with opportunities to be agents of change in their schools and communities.

Student engagement in Alberta continues to develop, advancing the way Alberta Education conducts its business of teaching and learning. Various branches within Alberta Education, other ministries, school jurisdictions, teachers, parents and others from the education community are increasingly recognizing the positive impacts of student engagement. The work of *Speak Out* strongly aligns with the vision of *Inspiring Education*. This high-level, transformational initiative presents a vision for education to 2030. The vision (Three E's) is to develop an education system in which every student is an **engaged thinker** and **ethical citizen** with an **entrepreneurial spirit**.

*Speak Out* provides students aged 14 through 19 with the tools they need to engage with and influence their fellow students and key education decision makers. These tools include online discussion forums and blogs on the *Speak Out* website, in-person forums with the *Speak Out* team or through the DVD toolkit, the Annual *Speak Out* Conference and the Minister's Student Advisory Council. Over the past year, *Speak Out* has collected valuable student feedback on many priority issues in Alberta Education, such as:

- How do students learn at their best?
- What actions can adults or students take to improve how education looks and feels?
- Inclusive education—how do we ensure that all students are successful and feel comfortable enough in their learning environment to do their best work?
- Provincial assessment in Alberta—how can the Three E's be measured?
- How is technology used to support the creation and sharing of knowledge?

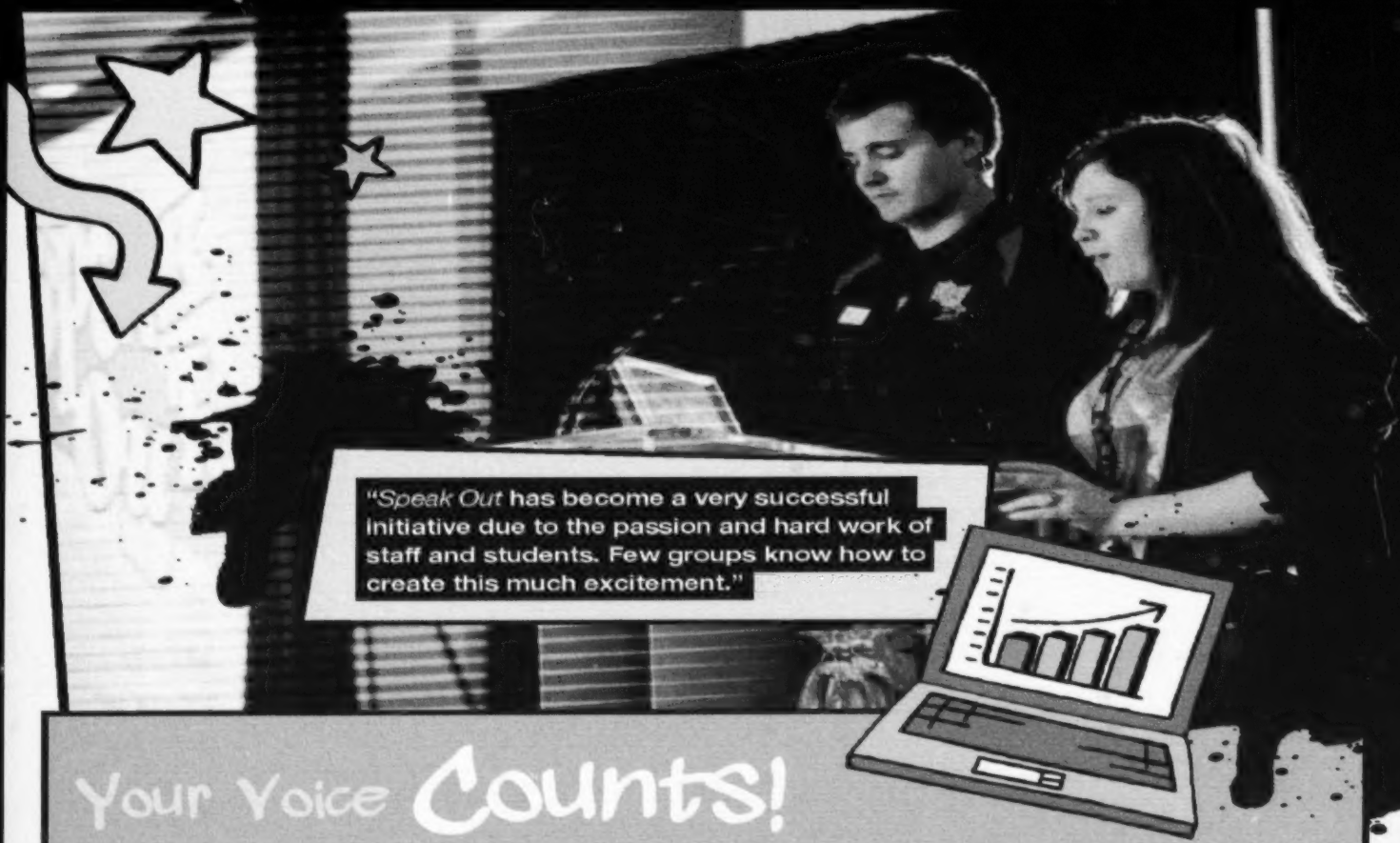
This feedback helps to inform and influence the growth and development of many Alberta Education programs and initiatives as we move forward with the work of *Inspiring Education* and a student-centred focus ensuring that all learning and education decisions are about learners achieving their full potential.

We hope that you enjoy the new format of our *Year in Review*, which provides a quick and fun overview of our activities for the year. For those of you who prefer statistics and charts, the supplemental materials on our website will provide you with detailed responses from Alberta students and the statistical data analysis. Please visit http://www.speakout.alberta.ca/YIR2012-13 to view extended versions of the Multimedia, Forums, Conference and Council sections of the Year in Review 2012-2013.

Looking forward, *Speak Out* staff and our many student ambassadors will work closely with Alberta youth and other stakeholders to maximize the use of student voice, and apply the *Inspiring Education* framework to transform the way we address the learning needs of tomorrow.

"*Speak Out* is one of the best youth initiatives in Alberta because it allows students to develop connections while providing valuable input to our education system."

Please visit http://www.speakout.alberta.ca/YIR2012-13 to view extended versions of the Multimedia, Forums, Conference and Council sections of the Year in Review 2012-2013.



"*Speak Out* has become a very successful initiative due to the passion and hard work of staff and students. Few groups know how to create this much excitement."

# Your Voice Counts!

As a participant in *Speak Out*, you must wonder how your voice makes a difference. Alberta Education's School Technology Branch has been involved with *Speak Out* for the last three years. The work of School Technology Branch is about supporting students and the Ministry in understanding how technology can advance learning and teaching. We have had several opportunities to speak to *Speak Out* student participants and chaperones, and what we heard during these sessions has been used to support ongoing research. Your input was also recently highlighted in *Student Reactions to Learning With Technology*, a book published internationally in 2012.

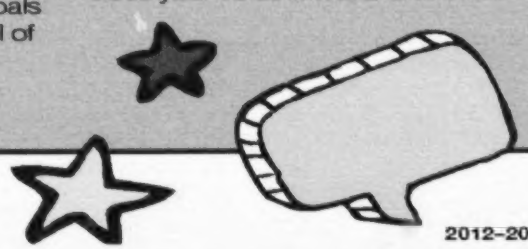
This last year, School Technology Branch had the opportunity to present work that was being done to update the *Learning and Technology Policy Framework* at the Minister's Student Advisory Council (the Council) and at the *Speak Out* Conference. When it is released, the 2013 *Learning and Technology Policy Framework* will help government and local school authorities develop policies to work toward the vision of *Inspiring Education* through the innovative and effective use of technology in K–12 schools. It will help ensure that when government or school authorities or principals or teachers make decisions about technology, all of those decisions work together and focus on achieving a common goal.

What difference did your voice make? When we presented at the Council, there were only three policy directions in the policy framework. But the feedback we had from the Council was that training for all staff—something that wasn't addressed in the framework—is also important. We took that information back to the School Technology Advisory Committee (the advisory group responsible for decisions on updating the *Learning Technology Policy Framework*), and the Council's advice contributed to the creation of a new policy direction: Professional Learning.

When we presented at the Annual *Speak Out* Conference, we were then able to reaffirm what we had been hearing. During our sessions, we also heard a great deal about access, and that concern is reflected in the draft policy framework's fifth policy direction: Access, Infrastructure and Digital Learning Environments.

Your voice was captured in the updated draft of the *Learning and Technology Policy Framework*, and we appreciate that valuable contribution. You have helped to co-create a document that will set the direction across this province.

Does your voice make a difference? Totally!



"International education is a way for students to be able to be exposed to different cultures other than their own. This could mean participating in an exchange program through school where you get to know another culture or travel to a different country."

# Speak Out Multimedia

*Speak Out*'s website went live on November 3, 2008. Since its inaugural year, the website has grown to include a moderated and interactive discussion board, a daily blog, news items, a Twitter feed, a Facebook page and a YouTube channel. This multimedia approach has allowed *Speak Out* to stay relevant and accessible to youth across Alberta.

## This Year

This year, *Speak Out* expanded its online presence with a new look to its website, new website functionality, a Twitter account and a Facebook page. The website featured a daily student blog, student-generated discussion boards, information on the Annual *Speak Out* Conference and the Minister's Student Advisory Council, summaries of each *Speak Out* forum, weekly poll questions and information on contests. Students who register for the website and create a username can participate in discussion board conversations or create their own discussion.

Our Twitter and Facebook accounts enhanced our online presence. Primarily, these communication avenues were used to disseminate important information about *Speak Out* and direct students back to the website for details. *Speak Out* also used Twitter and Facebook to promote student blog posts, highlight contests and raise awareness about *Speak Out*.

## Website Hosts

Each month, Speak Out partnered with other government branches within Alberta Education or with other Ministries within the Alberta Government. Each month's host created poll questions, discussion board questions and a monthly survey. The website hosts received reports of the data collected from students who participated on the website.

The following is a summary of the major themes that emerged in the general discussion and featured forums.

**September 2012**

I Am Part of an Inclusive Education System

- Students should say hello to, talk to and help out students who look lost or are new to the school.
- Students want to be included in all aspects of their education.
- Everyone should have access to quality education.

**October 2012**

International Education

- International education lets students connect to different cultures in an increasingly interdependent world.
- International education presents an opportunity for Alberta students to go elsewhere and connect with and learn from other students with different cultures.
- International education is important because we need to be connected and open-minded.

**November 2012**

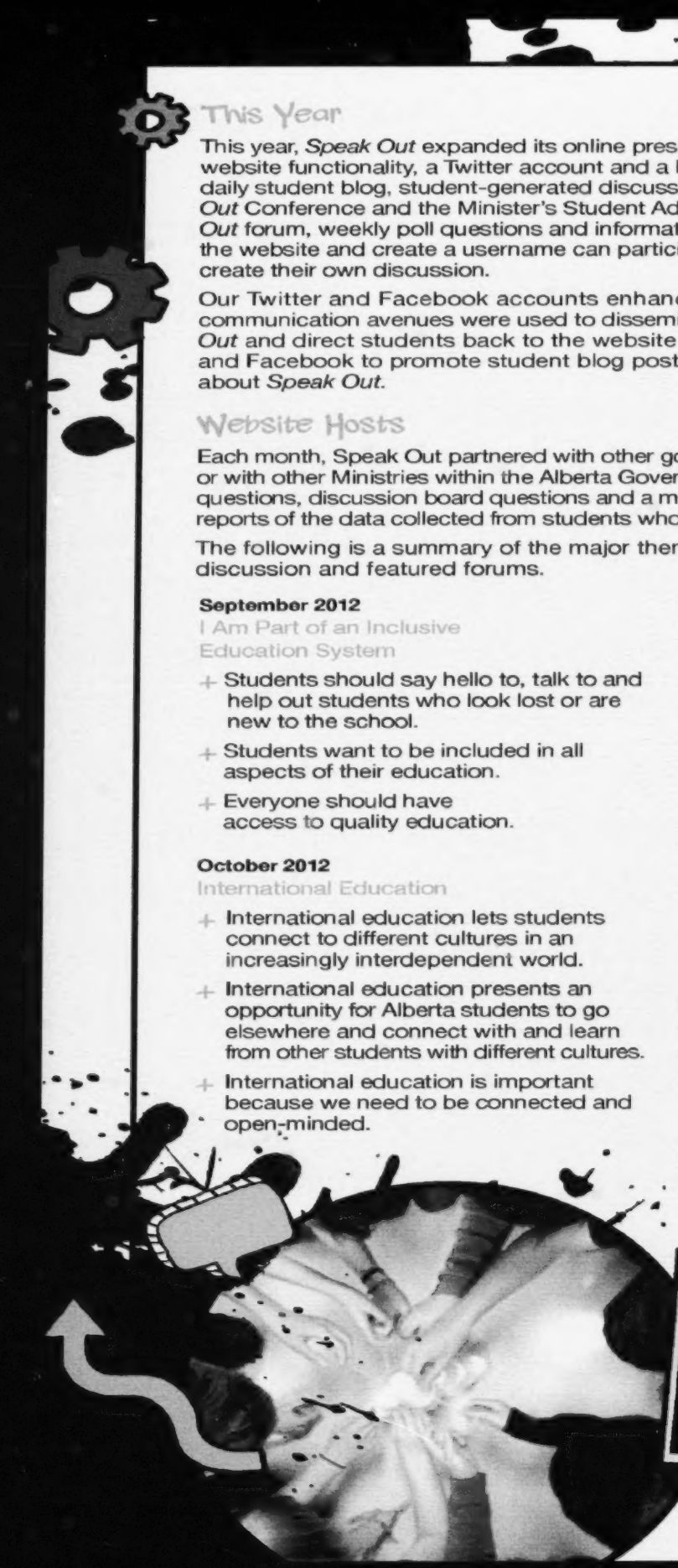
National Bullying Awareness Week

- Reporting bullying is necessary for it to go away.
- Rude hashtags, posting pictures without permission and posting videos without permission are forms of bullying that you can't get away from and that don't disappear over time. They exist in cyberspace forever.
- Raising awareness and anti-bullying campaigns help to reduce bullying.
- Some schools do a lot to stop bullying, and bullying is decreased. Others do very little with respect to bullying, and the problem remains.

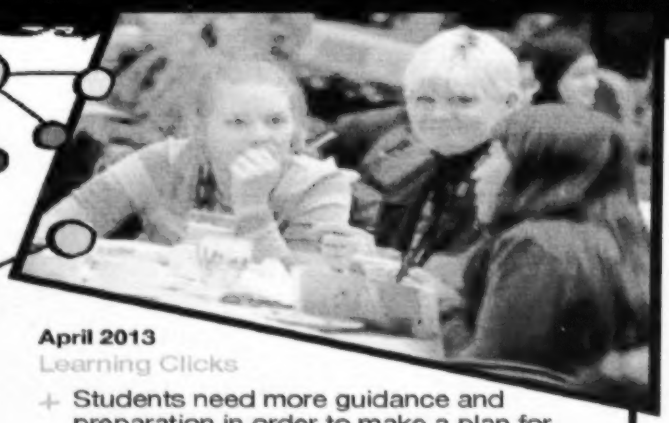
**December 2012**

Student Engagement Month

- Students want opportunities to lead activities.
- Students recognize that, at times, leadership from an adult is needed to move things along.
- Students are capable of making change.
- Engagement is linked to interest levels in subjects and activities.



"My school does a lot to prevent bullying. We have seminars, posters and weekly speeches about bullying and the harms of it. One of the most effective programs was the Olweus program. It raised awareness through the school so quickly. After using it for a year, I've noticed an extreme drop in the bullying rates."



**January 2013**

Alberta Environment

- Water cleanliness, climate change, air quality, renewable sources of energy and pollution related to oil and gas are the most pressing items for students.
- Recycling habits need to improve.
- Students want to take action on environmental issues because they believe the situation is critical and they have a sense of responsibility.

**February 2013**

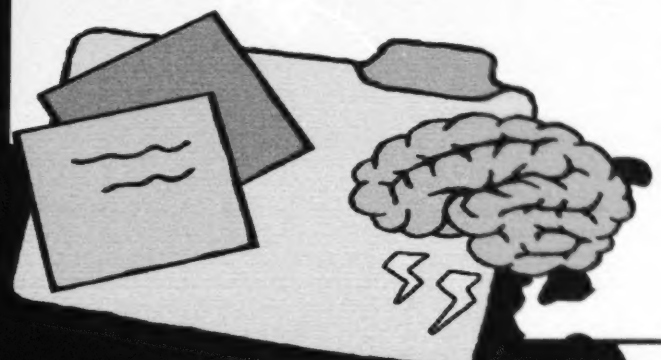
Here's Your Chance to Help Create Credential Change

- Teaching students to be engaged learners and ethical citizens is an easier outcome in school than teaching them to have an entrepreneurial spirit.
- When there are connections between the outcomes taught in different classes, students learn the material/skills better.
- Links should be made between all the subjects.

**March 2013**

Distance Education

- Students often enrol in distance education courses in order to take a course that is not offered at their school.
- Many students do not like taking distance education classes, but they see it as a quick way to complete a course.
- Distance education works great for some, but it does not work well for others.
- Some students miss the classroom environment. However, they also think the flexibility is great.



**April 2013**

Learning Clicks

- Students need more guidance and preparation in order to make a plan for after graduation.
- Careful goal setting and planning are important.
- Students fear paying for school when they are unsure whether they are in the right field of study, when they worry about the prospects of paying loans back and when they worry about getting a job after graduating from post-secondary school.

**May 2013**

Alcohol and Youth

- Students believe that their peers choose to consume alcohol because they're curious, they think it is fun, it's what you do at parties, they feel peer pressure and alcohol is easy to acquire and hide.
- Students think that drinking alcohol makes them look cool and more mature.
- Some students wouldn't drink if not for peer pressure. Other students do not drink for religious reasons.

**June 2013**

*Speak Out* Is Listening

- *Speak Out* was looking for feedback from students on whether they should replace the discussion board with student blog posts starting September 2013.
- Students felt that it would be a good idea to get more background information on topics and that a larger discussion would result.
- Others felt that the discussion board, as it stands today, allows students more opportunity for open, unguided discussions.
- *Speak Out* also asked students how they handle the stress of exams and to provide tips for other students.
- Overall, students suggested studying well in advance of the exam, getting a good night's rest the night before, eating healthy foods, working out to relieve stress and relying on your network of friends to help you study.

# Open Mic Tribune Libre

The Open Mic / Tribune Libre allows students to discuss and debate almost any topic they encounter in their education. This year, students posted comments on a variety of topics, including the following:

Do you think what you are learning is relevant to your future?

+ Many students were adamant that a great deal of what they are learning is irrelevant to their futures. Others were unsure.
+ Most students said that more life skills, career counselling and social skills training is important.
+ Some students said that all learning helps prepare them for the future in some way.

Should teachers give zeros?

+ Opinions varied greatly on this topic. Students had concerns about inconsistent rules for late and incomplete assignments.
+ In general, most students supported losing marks for late and incomplete assignments, not receiving zeros.
+ The majority also said that plagiarism, other forms of cheating and not handing in assignments are grounds for a zero.

Time limits on tests and assignments

+ Some students said that time limits are necessary to prepare them for "the real world."
+ Most students said that time limits do not always allow test takers the time they need to demonstrate that they know something.
+ In general, students said that students with exceptional needs should get longer to write tests without losing marks.

High school stress

+ Stress is a major recurring theme identified by students.
+ The key sources of stress include diploma exams, other exams and assignments, class workload and homework expectations, getting sick and missing class, peer and family pressure, and having multiple exams/assignments due on the same day from different teachers.

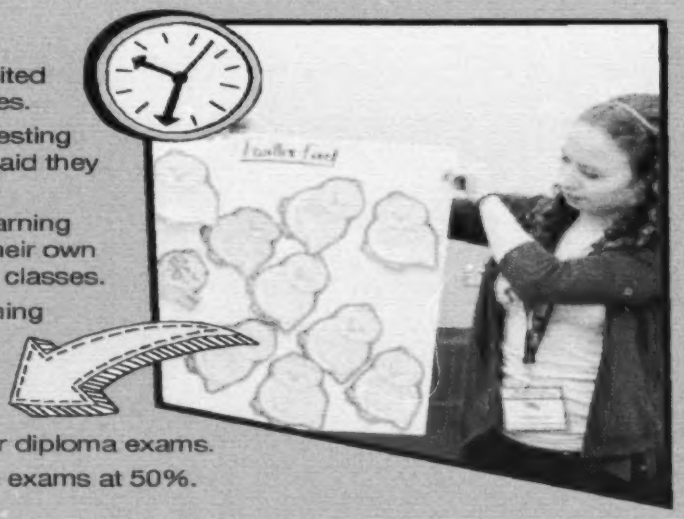
Parental choice and the curriculum...

+ Some students said that until a student is 18, parents' legal right to choose for their children should be upheld.
+ Other students said that they should decide what they wanted to learn.
+ Many students said that the age of the student should determine who chooses. Students in elementary school, for instance, should not have as much input into their own education as students in high school.

"Sometimes I feel like what we learn in school has no application for real life. However, I know that by learning it I am expanding my abilities, and, in fact, learning how to learn. I know that some of the subjects I am taking I will not pursue past high school, but it is still helpful for becoming disciplined and able to face challenges. I think my school could do a better job of showing us what different career paths we could take."

What is your preferred learning style?

+ Most students said that they are given only limited opportunities to learn via different learning styles.
+ Most students said that lessons are more interesting when various teaching styles are used. Many said they need more hands-on activities.
+ Some students have learned about different learning styles in CALM class. Their understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses helps them in other classes.
+ Some students said that adjusting to one teaching style in a particular class is easier than having multiple strategies used at the same time.



Diploma exams

+ Most students would prefer a later start time for diploma exams.
+ Many students questioned the weighting of the exams at 50%.

A complete summary of all the online contributions can be found at http://www.speakout.alberta.ca

# Minister Wants to Know

An important part of the *Speak Out* mission is for the views of students to impact the policy decisions of the government. In support of this goal, and to demonstrate this commitment to students and the public, the Honourable Jeff Johnson, Minister of Education, participated in a series of Minister Wants to Know videos. These videos were intended to encourage discussions among Alberta students through the *Speak Out* website.

Video 1 explores the following questions: What is it that makes your teachers so great? What are their qualities, characteristics and attributes?

Students frequently said that teachers need to know and understand each student as a person first. They also indicated that working extra hours coaching, running clubs and giving extra help with academics were all traits of excellent teachers.

Video 2 explores the following topic: The Three E's: an engaged thinker, who is an ethical citizen with an entrepreneurial spirit. Is the education system doing enough to instil the entrepreneurial spirit in you?

Students generally said that schools require more funding. They also said that, in their experience, they were not receiving schooling that encouraged or developed an entrepreneurial spirit.

Any entrepreneurial education that did happen typically occurred in option classes or in CALM.

The feedback from Alberta students provided the Minister with direct, unfiltered opinions from Alberta youth.

"There is definitely a lack of funding for schools in Alberta. We are the future generation, and we are the ones who will be making a change in the future. As for an entrepreneurial spirit, I don't think that schools are doing enough. We take math classes, but I have yet to take any kind of economic class where I learn about taxes and how to manage debt."

Please visit http://www.speakout.alberta.ca/YIR2012-13 to view an extended version of the Multimedia section of the Year in Review 2012-2013.

# Speak Out and Win

Every year, *Speak Out* hosts a number of contests. One of these, the *Speak Out* and Win contest, gives students the chance to win great prizes when they log in to the discussion board and share their experiences and opinions about education-related topics. When a student's total number of posts to the discussion board reaches different milestones, the *Speak Out* team mails prizes to the student's home.

This year, we had our first grand prize winner, **johndeere**. *Speak Out* had the opportunity to chat with johndeere about winning our grand prize and about the experience of participating on the *Speak Out* website:

*Speak Out:* How many years have you been participating on the *Speak Out* website?

**johndeere:** I have participated on the *Speak Out* website for two school years.

*Speak Out:* Why did you decide to participate on the *Speak Out* discussion board?

**johndeere:** When I was introduced to the website by one of my friends, I thought it was a great idea that the government has set up a website where we, students across Alberta, have the opportunity to share our thoughts and experiences about our education in order to help decision making that will affect our own future. I thought it would be an awesome opportunity to voice my own opinion and give feedback about how I feel. I think it is great how the government is taking our opinions into consideration.

*Speak Out:* Have you been inspired to make changes in your school because of participating with *Speak Out*?

**johndeere:** Yes! *Speak Out* has given me ideas and thoughts about my education that I had never even considered before. Even simple things like how students like or dislike different courses offered through schools. Coming from a small town, on *Speak Out*, I discovered programs that I had never even heard of, such as AP/IB courses. The website has also inspired me to think of my education in more depth. I have discussed some of the topics from the discussion board with my friends. I am in 4-H and was considering doing my speech this year on a topic like "Should teachers be allowed to give zeros?" because this is a topic that has definitely interested me and could also interest a crowd.

*Speak Out:* What advice would you give other students so that they might reach the 1,000-post milestone?

**johndeere:** Start discussing with your friends. This makes it interesting, and you definitely can come up with some great opinions! One of my friends and I would discuss topics on the discussion board during one of our option classes at school. We would also go on *Speak Out* and comment on each other's posts. This way, we got some great ideas off of each other during discussions, and we were more inspired to talk with other students and get them involved. When both you and a friend are involved, it is easier to come up with a bunch of ideas, and you have fun doing it too!

*Speak Out:* Any final comments about *Speak Out*?

**johndeere:** *Speak Out* has definitely made me consider the involvement I have in my education and within my school. It has given me the opportunity to voice my opinion and look at my education from a different perspective. It is awesome that the government is looking for the opinions directly from us, the students of Alberta.

If you would like to get involved in your own education, visit us at http://www.speakout.alberta.ca.

# Speak Out Forums

## Background

Alberta Education has now completed its fifth year of *Speak Out* forums. *Speak Out* forums provide an opportunity for Alberta Education to speak directly with students about their education. Between April 2012 and June 2013, 46 forums took place. This year, the *Speak Out* forums were led by students using the DVD toolkit or led by the *Speak Out* team using a similar, in-person forum process.

The step-by-step *Speak Out* DVD toolkit was designed to ensure anyone, at any time and in any place, could host a *Speak Out* forum. By using this approach, the *Speak Out* team has not only built local capacity and local engagement but also enabled more students to find their voice and speak out.

Between the *Speak Out* team-led forums and student-led forums, the *Speak Out* team heard from 1,544 students in 27 of the 62 school districts as well as one at the University of Alberta with students who had already graduated. The forums were conducted in all varieties of educational systems in Alberta, including public, private, separate, francophone, charter, and outreach schools. The *Speak Out* team continues to look for diverse perspectives and experiences by engaging rural, urban, remote, First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI), and at-risk immigrant youth across Alberta.

At each forum, students were broken up into small working groups to discuss their educational experiences and share what is working, what isn't and what both adults and students can do to improve how education looks and feels.

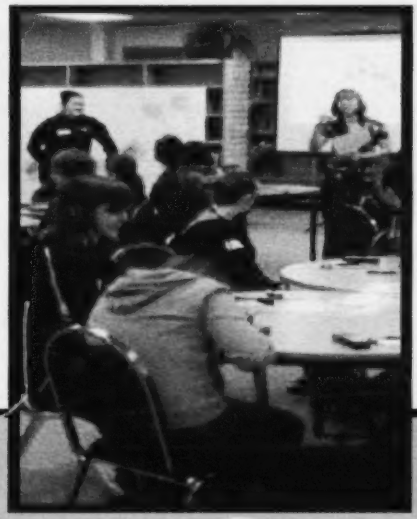
At the *Speak Out* forums, students said that when they are learning at their best, they are engaged and interested in what they are learning and they have a comfortable, dynamic learning environment.

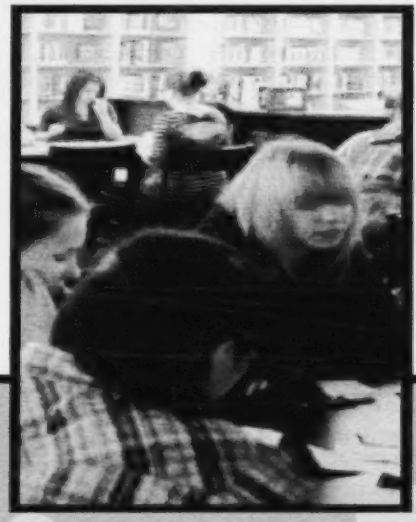
When asked what is holding them back, students said distractions and ineffective teaching styles.

When asked what adults can do to improve how education looks and feels, they said adults (parents/guardians and educators) should use a variety of teaching styles and methods and provide positive support and encouragement.

Finally, when asked what actions students can take to improve how education looks and feels, the students said they should make more of an effort in their education; respect fellow students, teachers and themselves; and have a positive attitude.

The *Speak Out* forums were an incredible opportunity to let students know that they have a voice and that decision makers not only *want* to hear from them, but *need* to hear from them.

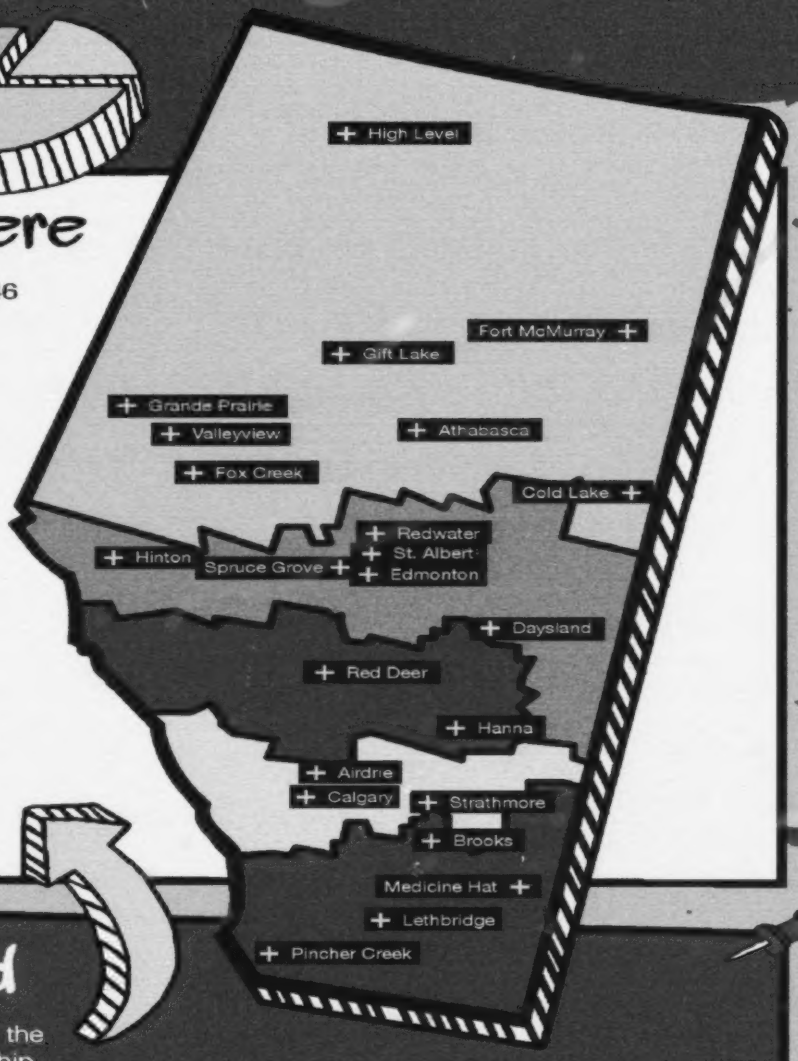




# Where We Were

Listed below are the locations of the 46 *Speak Out* forums held between April 1, 2012, and June 30, 2013.

- Airdrie
- Pincher Creek
- Gift Lake
- Brooks
- Redwater
- Hanna
- Cold Lake
- St. Albert
- Hinton
- Edmonton
- Valleyview
- Medicine Hat
- Fox Creek
- Athabasca
- Red Deer
- Grande Prairie
- Calgary
- Spruce Grove
- High Level
- Daysland
- Strathmore
- Lethbridge
- Fort McMurray




# What Happened

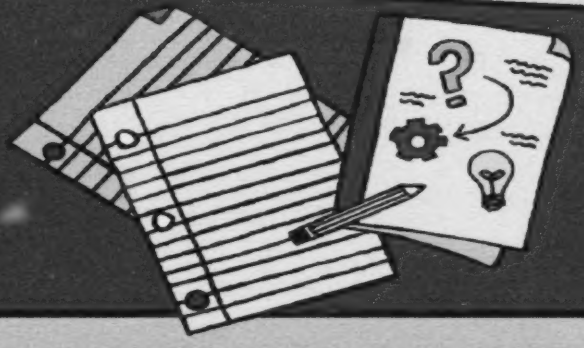
In preparation for each *Speak Out* forum, the *Speak Out* team worked with the leadership of each school to ensure that a diverse student population would participate in the session. The *Speak Out* team asked for a group of students who represented the voices of all provincial youth, from all different backgrounds—students who excel in school, struggle in school, love sports, love the arts, and everything in between.

At the beginning of each *Speak Out* forum, an overview of *Speak Out* – the Alberta Student Engagement Initiative was provided. Students were then separated into working groups with one leader at each table. The table leaders helped their groups of students stay on task, facilitated discussions and captured ideas.

Throughout each *Speak Out* forum, activities and games were used to help build team spirit and camaraderie. The purpose of these team-building activities was to enable students to be more open and direct when sharing their thoughts and ideas on each discussion question.

**"Thank you for this opportunity to be here. It really did some changes towards my view about the educations and the view about our world."**

**"I enjoyed being able to speak what I thought needed to be done in the school to improve my education. Well, not just mine, everyone's, as we seemed to come upon very similar answers."**

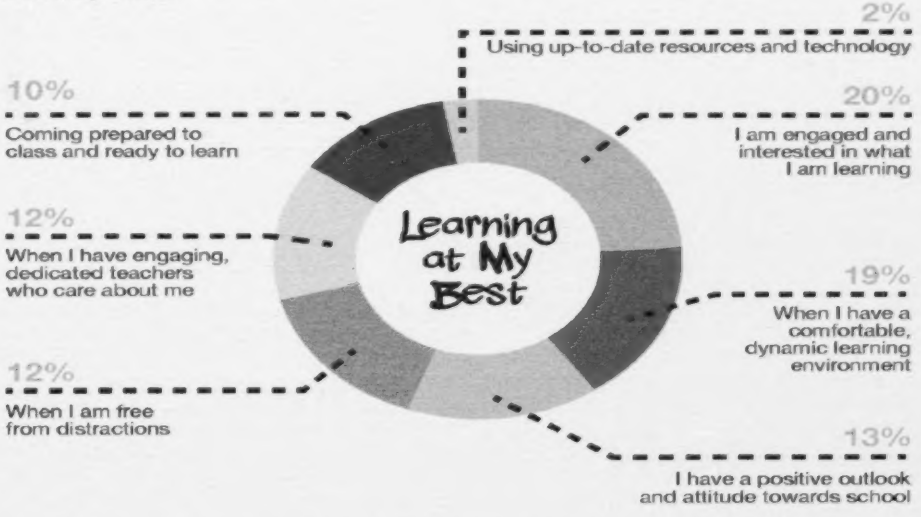


# What We Heard

The following diagrams and tables summarize the top student responses to the questions asked during each of the 46 *Speak Out* forums. The diagrams identify general themes, including the percentage of student votes each response received.

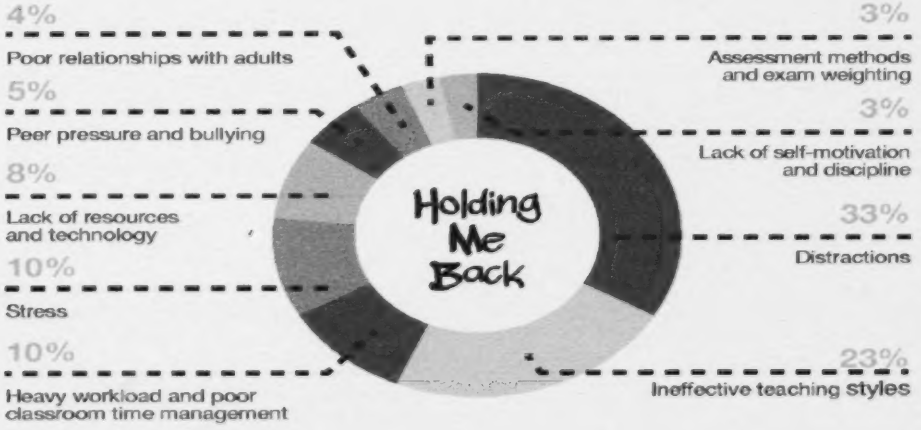
## Question One: What does it look like when you are learning at your best?

The purpose of this question was to find out what each student's ideal learning experience looked like. Students were asked to think about the "who, what, where, when, why and how of learning" to brainstorm as many ideas as they could.


Learning at My Best
2%
Using up-to-date resources and technology
20%
I am engaged and interested in what I am learning
19%
When I have a comfortable, dynamic learning environment
13%
I have a positive outlook and attitude towards school
12%
When I am free from distractions
12%
When I have engaging, dedicated teachers who care about me
10%
Coming prepared to class and ready to learn

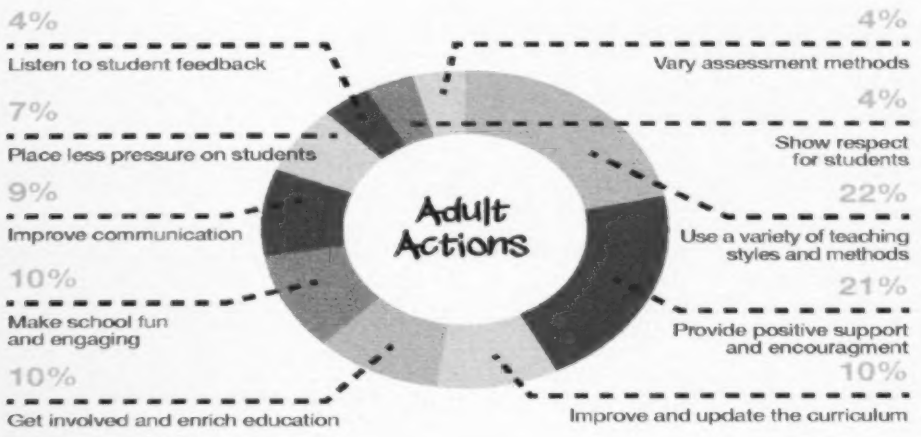
## Question Two: What is holding you back from learning at your best?

The purpose of this question was to find out what it was that students didn't like about school or what was preventing them from being the best student they could be. They were asked to brainstorm as many ideas as possible.



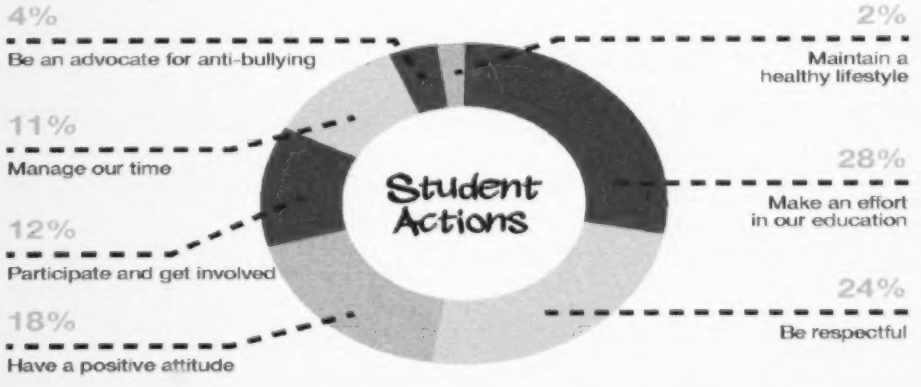
## Question Three: What actions can adults take to improve how education looks and feels?

The purpose of this question was to get students to suggest ways that adults could improve their learning and education experience. They were asked to think about their answers to **Question Two** (What is holding you back from learning at your best?) and provide solutions that adults could effect. The students were asked to provide as many solutions as possible.




## Question Four: What actions can students take to improve how education looks and feels?

The *Speak Out* team always feels that this is the most important question we can ask students. The purpose of this question is to get students thinking about what they can do to improve their education experience. It really is the question that starts them on the road to engaging in their learning, overcoming the roadblocks that are holding them back and getting them closer to the bright, shiny ideal of **Question One** (What does it look like when you are learning at your best?). The students were asked to provide as many solutions as possible.




The *Speak Out* team understands the importance of being open and transparent in this process. Within days of delivering each *Speak Out* forum, the student-generated data was transcribed into a What We Heard report and posted on the *Speak Out* website. The report was also sent to the forum host, all forum participants, the school administration and the district administration.

**"It's really neat to see all our perspectives put together. And thank you for Speak Out. I had a lot of fun and I feel glad that I can be a part in making our education better."**

*Please visit http://www.speakout.alberta.ca/YIR2012-13 to view an extended version of the Forums section of the Year in Review 2012-2013.*

# What Does It Mean to Speak Out?

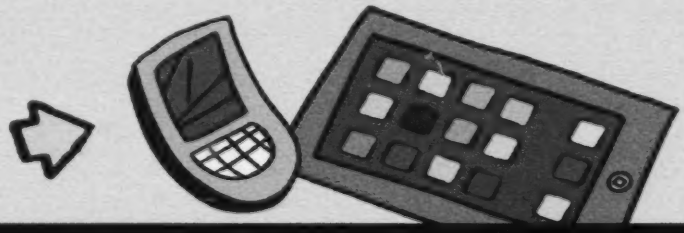
Kaeleigh is a student from rural Alberta who has been an active participant in *Speak Out* for two years. She was introduced to *Speak Out* by one of her teachers, and she was surprised to find a government initiative that was openly inviting the student voice. Once she started out by participating on the discussion board, she says, "I felt so empowered to be using my voice that I knew I had to continue."

And continue she did. Over the past two years, Kaeleigh has hosted three *Speak Out* forums. Every student in her school, from Grade 7 to Grade 12, has participated in a forum. Obviously, students at Kaeleigh's school have a passion for getting involved. As Kaeleigh notes, "Currently, there is a Student Engagement team, led by myself, working on the followup project from the forums."

Kaeleigh and the Student Engagement team have been involved in one of *Speak Out's* Taking Action pilot projects. "Through the information collected in our forums, as well as various focus meetings with students and staff, we concluded we wanted to focus on bridging the communication gap between teachers and students," Kaeleigh says. Their solution was the "Bridge Board," which, she explains, is designed to "communicate student feedback on classroom learning to teachers, and get them actively thinking about creating a more engaging learning environment."

While getting students involved is one part of the challenge, working with school staff and administration is equally important in making change. Kaeleigh says, "We have also had tremendous staff support in our school—from allowing us to present at staff meetings, to giving constructive feedback and offering input to our plans, administration at our school has been extremely supportive, accommodating and open to change as we try to improve the quality of education within our school."

Ultimately, the goal of *Speak Out* is to empower and support students as they become agents of change. Asked if she feels like an agent of change, Kaeleigh says, "I absolutely feel like an agent of change, but not independently. Our Student Engagement team has always functioned as a unit in which we promote change together. Without other students, I would not be as motivated to continue or as enabled to make change. Being involved in *Speak Out* has showed me what engagement is. *Speak Out* has taught me how to be a leader and how to advocate for what you believe. *Speak Out* has made students in my school feel empowered, and they have become engaged in their learning, because they now know that it is indeed their learning."



# Fifth Annual Speak Out CONFERENCE

On April 12–14, 2013, students aged 14 to 19, along with their chaperones, gathered from all areas of Alberta for the fifth Annual *Speak Out* Conference in Edmonton. Hosted by the Minister's Student Advisory Council (the Council), the *Speak Out* Conference gave students and their chaperones a chance to explore and provide input on key issues and initiatives related to the province's education system and to connect with Alberta Education representatives and other students with similar interests and aspirations. The three-day event provided delegates with an abundance of mentorship, workshops and networking opportunities. Highlights from the weekend's comprehensive program included:

- Welcome and opening remarks by the Minister of Education, Jeff Johnson
- Inspiring keynote speeches by Nikhil Goyal and Ken Bautista
- A series of engaging breakout workshops for both students and chaperones
- Dozens of networking opportunities for both students and chaperones
- Live entertainment, including a musical performance by Braden Gates and a spoken word performance by Ahmed Ali, also known as Knowmadic, as well as a hip hop demonstration by Rhythm Speaks
- An energetic dance party hosted by Urban Metropolis
- Closing remarks by the chair of the Youth Secretariat, Mr. Matt Jeneroux, MLA Edmonton–South West

## Keynote Speakers

This year, the *Speak Out* Conference had two amazing keynote speakers. On Friday night, conference delegates heard from Nikhil Goyal, a 17-year-old student from New York, and author of *One Size Does Not Fit All: A Student's Assessment of School.* Goyal's presentation focused on the future of education in North America, and how the industrial model of education that has been used in the past must be transformed to allow for better student engagement and student success within education.

On Saturday morning, delegates heard Ken Bautista, a local entrepreneur and philanthropist, talk about how students can become entrepreneurial thinkers in Alberta, and take on roles as creative students and participants in their school communities.

# Who Attended?

An extensive effort was made to promote the fifth Annual *Speak Out* Conference to all junior high and high school students and jurisdictions across Alberta. We were more overwhelmed with applications than ever. As with all *Speak Out* events, it was important to ensure that a diverse student population was represented at the conference, including a cross-section of students aged 14 to 19, with varied academic goals, personal interests, abilities and opinions. All students who did not make the 2013 application cut-off are encouraged to apply again for the sixth Annual *Speak Out* Conference in April 2014. The online application will be available on the *Speak Out* website at http://www.speakout.alberta.ca in fall 2013.

This year, for the first time, we also welcomed students from Alberta Accredited International Schools. We were fortunate to have student and chaperone delegates join us from Macau (China) and Bermuda.

## Where They Came From

1 Edmonton
2 Airdrie
3 Peace River
4 Alder Flats
5 Enchant
6 Pincher Creek
7 Alliance
8 Entwistle
9 Red Deer
10 Ardrossan
11 Evansburg
12 Rocky Mountain House
13 Barnwell
14 Fort Chipewyan
15 Rolling Hills
16 Bentley
17 Fort McMurray
18 Rosemary
19 Blackfalds
20 Fox Creek
21 Scandia
22 Bowden
23 Galahad
24 Sherwood Park
25 Brooks
26 Gibbons
27 Slave Lake
28 Buck Lake
29 Grande Cache
30 Spruce Grove
31 Calgary
32 High Level
33 St. Albert
34 Camrose
35 High Prairie
36 Stony Plain
37 Castor
38 Irma
39 Taber
40 Cayley
41 Kinuso
42 Tees
43 Cherry Grove
44 Lacombe
45 Tilley
46 Claresholm
47 Leslieville
48 Vauxhall
49 Coaldale
50 Medicine Hat
51 Wainwright
52 Cold Lake
53 Nordegg
54 Wembley
55 Daysland
56 Okotoks
57 Westerose
58 De Winton
59 Olds
60 Winfield

# Student Workshops

### Demystifying Diploma Exams

How are diploma exams made? How are they marked? What happens if you don't like your mark? How do other countries handle standardized tests? These are just some of the questions that were covered in this session. Students discussed and debated their opinions about the diploma exam during a game of "Rally 'Round the Flag."

### Online Resources to Plan for Your Future

Students in this session learned how the Alberta Learning Information Service (ALIS) website can help them plan their career, education and job search. This hands-on session had students working with interactive tools like CAREERinsite, occupational profiles and videos, scholarship search tools, the e-Resumé Review service and much more. Visit ALIS at alis.alberta.ca.

### The League of Extraordinary Mentors: Find the Super Mentor Inside of You!

In this interactive adventure, students created a super mentor persona and found their inner mentoring powers. They learned about strength-based practices based on research done in Alberta and discovered the Career and Technology Studies modules available for students. The session explored the Alberta Mentoring Partnership and the ways that mentoring can become a positive part of a student's life, school and community on many levels.

### Wanna Rule the World? Student Leadership in International Education

Students participated in a dialogue on the leadership role students play in international education. The conversation began with the big picture of international education as a journey from Kindergarten to Grade 12. Students talked about current and past international education initiatives led by students across the province and further opportunities for all students across Alberta.

### Technology: Hearing and Sharing Your Views

In this session, a variety of technology tools were used to get student feedback on the newly revised *Learning and Technology Policy Framework*. This document outlines five policy directions for school authorities. Students were given the chance to provide input, ideas and suggestions as Alberta Education moves toward implementing the framework.

### Distance Education in Alberta: Visioning the Future

Students who participated in this session expressed an interest in reshaping distance education and online learning in Alberta. They were asked to help Alberta Education understand what students need to succeed in our mobile and digital world. Working together, they explored what the future of distance education could be.

### The Future of High School Wellness Education

The Wellness Education team wanted to hear what students have to say about physical education, health education, career development and financial literacy. This interactive workshop had students discussing what they think students should study in high school to achieve a balanced state of emotional, intellectual, physical, social, spiritual, occupational and environmental well-being.

### Reimagining High School

Do you like the idea of waking up at 9 a.m. to go to school? What about having more flexible schedules? Do you think learning should be more connected to the real world? Does your school need more clubs? The students in this session discussed what a reimagined high school that supports success for all students could look, sound and feel like. Students shared their ideas about the future of high school based on their own experiences.

### Diploma 2.0: Considering Credential Change

Every year, a new crop of students leave school with a diploma or certificate in hand. Alberta Education is in the process of reviewing its current high school credentialing requirements (the courses that high school students need to have in order to earn a diploma or certificate). The High School Credentialing team asked students in this session to discuss the following questions: What do you want your high school credential to say about the person behind the paper? What high school courses and experiences (e.g., volunteer, sports, arts) do you think will develop the skills you need to successfully face the adult world after graduation?

### Belong. Learn... Succeed!

This session used fun and creative ways to get students thinking about diversity and inclusion in Alberta schools. The Inclusive Learning team wanted to hear students' ideas about belonging, learning and what makes a school an inclusive place to be.

### Taking Action: Student Discussion

Taking Action projects will give students the responsibility and opportunity for leading the enhancement of education in Alberta. Students in this session discussed how they are currently putting their voice into action, as well as how they would like to take action in their schools and communities, and then brainstormed on the types of support they would need to be successful.

# Chaperone Workshops

### Technology: Hearing and Sharing Your Views

In this session, a variety of technology tools were used to get chaperone feedback on the newly revised *Learning and Technology Policy Framework*. This document outlines five policy directions for school authorities. Chaperones were given the chance to provide input, ideas and suggestions as Alberta Education moves toward implementing the framework.

### Math: It's Mine

Today's society needs mathematical problem solvers, risk takers and innovators—learning math is not just about knowing facts! The learning and teaching environment must allow students to build on their mathematical knowledge to communicate, reason, build connections and use technology in real-life situations. This session showed how today's mathematics classroom helps students to attain both knowledge and critical skills, and how adults can support them in doing so.

### What We Know About Student Engagement and Why It Matters

Student engagement is a relatively new topic of interest in the education world, but we are learning that it is directly connected to student success in school. Studies show that students who are socially, institutionally and intellectually engaged at school are most likely to complete high school, experience high levels of wellness and become contributing members of society. This session highlighted the factors that enhance student engagement, and participants heard about examples of projects in Alberta that incorporate these strategies. Members of the Minister's Student Advisory Council shared what their peers have told them about student engagement in schools, along with strategies they use to encourage involvement in activities. Chaperones were also encouraged to share their experiences with some of the effective strategies they have seen in schools.

### Being Part of a Healthy School Community

This session focused on comprehensive school health. Participants discussed how to become involved on the school health action team, support the assessment of the school, help develop the action plan and promote a healthy school community. They also explored current tools and practices that help schools to make the healthy choice the easy choice.

### Diploma 2.0: Considering Credential Change

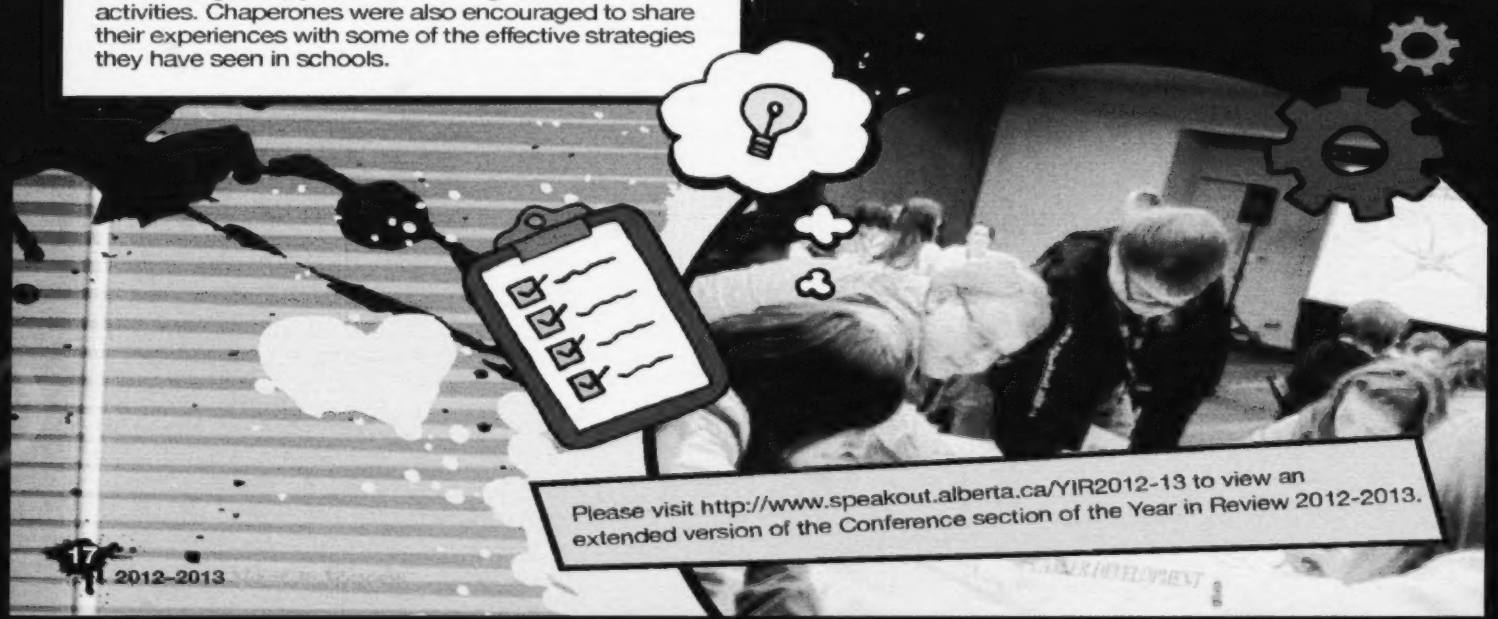
Every year, a new crop of students leaves school with a diploma or certificate in hand. Alberta Education is in the process of reviewing its current high school credentialing requirements (the courses needed in order to earn a diploma or certificate). In addition to gathering student views on the topic, the High School Credentialing team wanted to share information with the people who support and guide students.

## Implementation Plans

The voices that were gathered in both the student and chaperone sessions will be used by Alberta Education groups to further develop and improve education initiatives and programs. These voices will also be shared in future presentations to education stakeholders to inform their practices and to continue to improve education in the province. For more detailed implementation plans, please see the complete What We Heard reports on the *Speak Out* website at http://www.speakout.alberta.ca.

## How We Did

The vast majority of students and chaperones indicated on their conference evaluation forms that they were very glad to have participated in their sessions and felt confident their input will be considered. Delegates were also very glad to have participated in the conference overall and will continue to participate in other *Speak Out* activities.



Please visit http://www.speakout.alberta.ca/YIR2012-13 to view an extended version of the Conference section of the Year in Review 2012-2013.

# It Happens Here, There and Everywhere

The *Speak Out* team is constantly trying to find ways to empower students to make their voice heard. Although we work hard to inform and empower youth, we believe that students should be the agents of change, not us. We view ourselves as a support network for students who are actively engaged in their own education.

Our efforts include training students to host forums in their schools, providing DVD training kits, funding a Taking Action project and hosting the Annual *Speak Out* Conference. Many of the tools and strategies for making change have a formal or structured aspect. However, change can occur in many different ways.

One of the most powerful ways to make change is by simply engaging in conversations. If a student has a question about something in his or her school, we recommend talking to a teacher or school administrator.

It is also important to remember that conversations can happen anywhere and at any time. One example of an important conversation having an impact occurred at this year's *Speak Out* Conference. Many of the members of the Minister's Student Advisory Council (the Council) talked to the *Speak Out* team about the value of the student blog on our website. One of these talks happened just after setup while we were sitting on the floor in the Shaw Conference Centre awaiting the first student delegates to arrive.

During this discussion, Council members told us that the blog is important. They argued that the blog posts are student-generated and the topics need to be discussed with other students from across the province. However, a couple of Council members mentioned that they were not motivated to write any more blog posts. The primary concern was that there were rarely comments on any of their posts.

This impromptu conversation led to a deep discussion about the purpose of the student blog, our website and opportunities for student involvement. It has also led to a number of conversations back at *Speak Out* headquarters. Currently, and as a direct result of student input, we are in consultation with our information technology people exploring ways in which we can use the student blog as a new and improved discussion board and improved discussion board... all because of a student-initiated conversation that happened while we were sitting on the floor.

This is just one small example that illustrates how opportunities for engagement and input can happen here, there and everywhere!

# Gabriel's Story

Students who participate in *Speak Out* activities are agents of change in education. That change can take many forms and can occur on many levels. Some students work at the system level, while others focus their efforts on trying to make positive changes to their local schools.

One example of a student who was a successful agent of change was Gabriel Kreiner. During the 2012–2013 school year, Gabriel hosted a series of *Speak Out* forums at schools in Edmonton. Gabriel hoped to hear the student voice at these schools and raise awareness of issues that students found important.

Gabriel was successful in facilitating the forums, and reports were generated for each school. But Gabriel didn't expect what happened next.

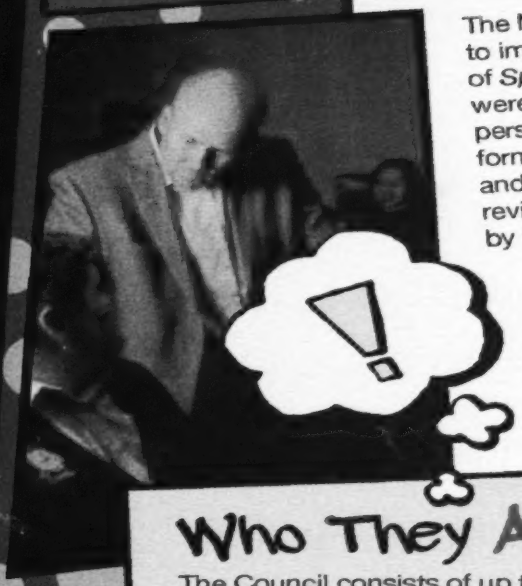
In one of the schools, the assistant principal noted that his school was going to combine the results of Gabriel's survey with the Tell Them From Me Survey. "The forum I held gave them more concrete facts and ideas to work with about what the students want from the adults," Gabriel says. "It helped the students set their ideas and goals of what they could and would do as young people to make the school better."

The uptake of the forum data was unexpected. Gabriel recalled, "I didn't expect them to take these so far, but I guess the forum played a small part in a larger school project."

With Gabriel's contributions of hosting the Speak Out forum, the changes the school was looking at making have added a crucial voice. This voice—the student voice—is necessary to include in decision making.

Gabriel's story illustrates one way in which students can become essential agents of change in Alberta's education system.

# Minister's Student Advisory Council



The Minister's Student Advisory Council (the Council) explores ways to improve education in Alberta, and its members act as ambassadors of *Speak Out* within their schools and communities. Council members were selected based on the diversity of their backgrounds, opinions, perspectives and experiences, as described in their written application forms. The selection process involved reviewing those applications and conducting extensive telephone interviews. Alberta Education reviewed the short list of candidates, and final approval was granted by the Minister of Education.

"I have had the most amazing time with the Council—learnt so many things, met amazing people and given such valuable opportunities." – Council member

"I just want to say thank you for showing me what is possible and giving me the chance to broaden my horizons on the leadership front." – Council member

## Who They Are

The Council consists of up to 24 youths between the ages of 14 and 19. For selection purposes, the province is divided into geographical zones, ensuring broad provincial representation. Council members are appointed to serve a one-year term, starting in July of each year. Council membership for 2012–2013 included:

| Name | Age | Grade | Town |
|---|---|---|---|
| Brooklyn Auger | 15 | 9 | Gift Lake |
| Maria Theresa Baclig | 17 | 11 | Edmonton |
| Nadia Baheri | 16 | 11 | Medicine Hat |
| Amy Berlinguette | 18 | 12 | Red Deer |
| Cyril Binny Kuruvilla | 16 | 11 | Calgary |
| Lane Bonertz | 18 | 12 | Rocky Mountain House |
| Cole Dempsey | 18 | 12 | Calgary |
| Khadija Farooq | 18 | Graduated | Edmonton |
| Rami Ghanem | 16 | 10 | Calgary |
| Mikaela Gilhooly | 15 | 9 | Calgary |
| Chantelle Gill | 19 | 12 | Calgary |
| Megan Kaminski | 17 | 12 | Cold Lake |
| Gabriel Kreiner | 18 | 12 | Jasper |
| Emily Marriott | 18 | Graduated | Edmonton |
| Mackenzie Martin | 18 | 12 | Edmonton |
| Perrin Michalyshyn | 16 | 11 | Edmonton |
| Iain Sander | 17 | 12 | Lethbridge |
| John Semashkewich | 16 | 11 | Athabasca |
| Aaron Severtson | 18 | 11 | Brooks |
| Nicola Singer | 18 | 12 | Daysland |
| Matthys VanStaalduinen | 16 | 11 | Calgary |
| Heather Whitfield | 18 | 12 | High Level |

# Their Activities and Responsibilities

"MSAC provided me with opportunities that I never would have thought possible as a high school student."

*Speak Out* and the Council create opportunities for students to exemplify the values contained in the *Inspiring Education* vision. The activities and responsibilities of Council members are unique in that each activity allows members to have an impact on the larger education community, as well as develop core competencies required for the future.

The work of the Council typically spans a traditional school year (September to June). During this time, they meet in person three times (fall, winter and spring). Following the fall meeting, Council members plan and host a *Speak Out* forum in their school with the support of a team of student table leaders and a teacher partner. Members not only build on their existing leadership skills during this activity, they also build leadership capacity in the team they work with on this project. Individual forum reports can be found online at http://www.speakout.alberta.ca on the forum page. Council members are expected to share the data they generate at their forum (a.k.a. the student voice) with both students and adults.

This year, Council members created presentation plans that identified who within the education system needed to hear what the students have said. This often became an exercise about identifying who is in the best position to take action on the student voice. Members presented to their teachers, principals, parent councils, student councils (both at the school and jurisdiction level), superintendents, school boards, other jurisdiction staff and MLAs. Council members approached this activity with the expectation of raising awareness of the issues identified by students and of gathering support to take action on the student voice.

For the first time this year, Council members created plans for taking action on the data they received at their *Speak Out* forum. The focus, following the forums, has always been on putting the responsibility back on adults to change the way education looks and feels for students in Alberta. Increasingly, Council members and other students in Alberta are recognizing the need for students to take responsibility and become agents of change in the education system.

In addition to work being done locally by Council members, the Council also plays a large role in planning, hosting and providing session facilitation at the Annual *Speak Out* Conference. Council members are matched with a presentation team from the Ministry, and together they develop an interactive and informative workshop for either a student or adult audience. Council members explore topics in depth and become experts in an area they are interested in. During the 75-minute conference sessions, Council members support and encourage participants to share their thoughts, opinions and ideas on topics such as distance education, high school credentialing and high school completion.

An ongoing activity for Council members is their participation in online discussions, polls, contests and surveys at http://www.speakout.alberta.ca. They, along with students all over Alberta, share their insights on a variety of topics. Those online voices are shared with decision makers in the system.

Council members also provide ongoing feedback on *Speak Out* initiatives, including the website, promotional products, recruitment strategies and advertising campaigns.

Members of the Council are provincial leaders, and as such are often invited to contribute to meetings, committees, conferences and other events. The following is a list of the events that Council members were asked to participate in in this year:

- Learning for a Sustainable Future Youth Round Table
- Curriculum Policy Advisory Committee
- Healthy Active Schools Symposia
- *Education Act* – Technical Briefing
- Minister's Luncheon for 2011 Nobel Peace Prize Winners
- Examination Advisory Committee
- ATA-Education Invitational Symposium on Encountering Curriculum Redesign – Bringing *Inspiring Education* to Life
- Health Promotion Coordinators Meeting
- Alberta Economic Summit
- Alberta Initiative for School Improvement Conference
- Calgary City Teachers' Convention

"on the council, you will have crazy amounts of fun and crazy amounts of learning. But most importantly, you are given the chance to make a difference, and that by itself is worth everything."
– Council member

# Their Meetings

During the fall meeting, Council members are provided with extensive training and orientation so that all members, regardless of previous experience, are equipped with the tools they need to achieve success during their term. This year, Council members identified the media relations session as particularly useful as it prepared them for a year filled with public speaking opportunities. In addition, the orientation to the Alberta education system gave members the context and confidence to contribute to discussions on important education issues. Members also received leadership and facilitation training.

Throughout the year, Council members meet directly with the Minister or a representative to present what students across Alberta are saying about their educational experience. This activity stretches Council members to interpret the data they receive and be innovative in their presentation style, as well as be open-minded and respectful of conflicting student issues, priorities and proposed solutions.

In addition to meeting with the Minister, Council members have the opportunity to work directly with Ministry business areas on priority projects or initiatives. During the meetings in the fall of 2012 and winter and spring of 2013, members learned about and contributed to discussions on inclusion, diploma exams, high school completions, student assessment, school technology and the dual credit strategy. Their views and comments shed light on student concerns and the opportunities that exist. Ongoing working relationships have emerged from these workshops, ensuring a continued student presence in Ministry work.

At the spring 2013 meeting, Council members initiated and participated in a workshop to discuss the role of student voice in the education system in Alberta. Members of the Alberta Youth Secretariat – Youth Advisory Panel, the Alberta Prevention of Bullying Youth Committee and EdStake also participated in this workshop and shared their vision for how all groups can start working together to achieve the common goal of increasing student involvement in government decision making. The initial vision generated at this workshop will be further cultivated as these discussions continue.

# Their Impact

Students are the largest and one of the most valued stakeholder groups in education; as a result, other stakeholders, including other Alberta Education program areas and other ministries within the Government of Alberta, are recognizing the importance of involving students in the development or improvement of their own projects and initiatives.

The work of the Council has an impact at many levels. They contribute to change at the local level in their schools and school jurisdictions through forums, presenting the student voice data to decision makers, and implementing action projects. At a provincial level, the work of past and present Councils has impacted high-profile areas of the ministry, such as the recent changes to diploma exams and the provincial achievement tests, in addition to impacting the direction of other projects and initiatives. Education is committed to ensuring that students have an ongoing voice in the system and will continue to include students as we move forward with the vision of *Inspiring Education*.

Please visit www.speakout.alberta.ca/YIR2012-13 to view an extended version of the Council section of the Year in Review 2012-2013.

# Acknowledgments

*Speak Out's* ability to connect with thousands of students, as well as their parents/guardians and educators, and forward their messages to influence priority areas of Alberta's education system, is a shared effort. *Speak Out* would like to acknowledge the following groups for their guidance and support:

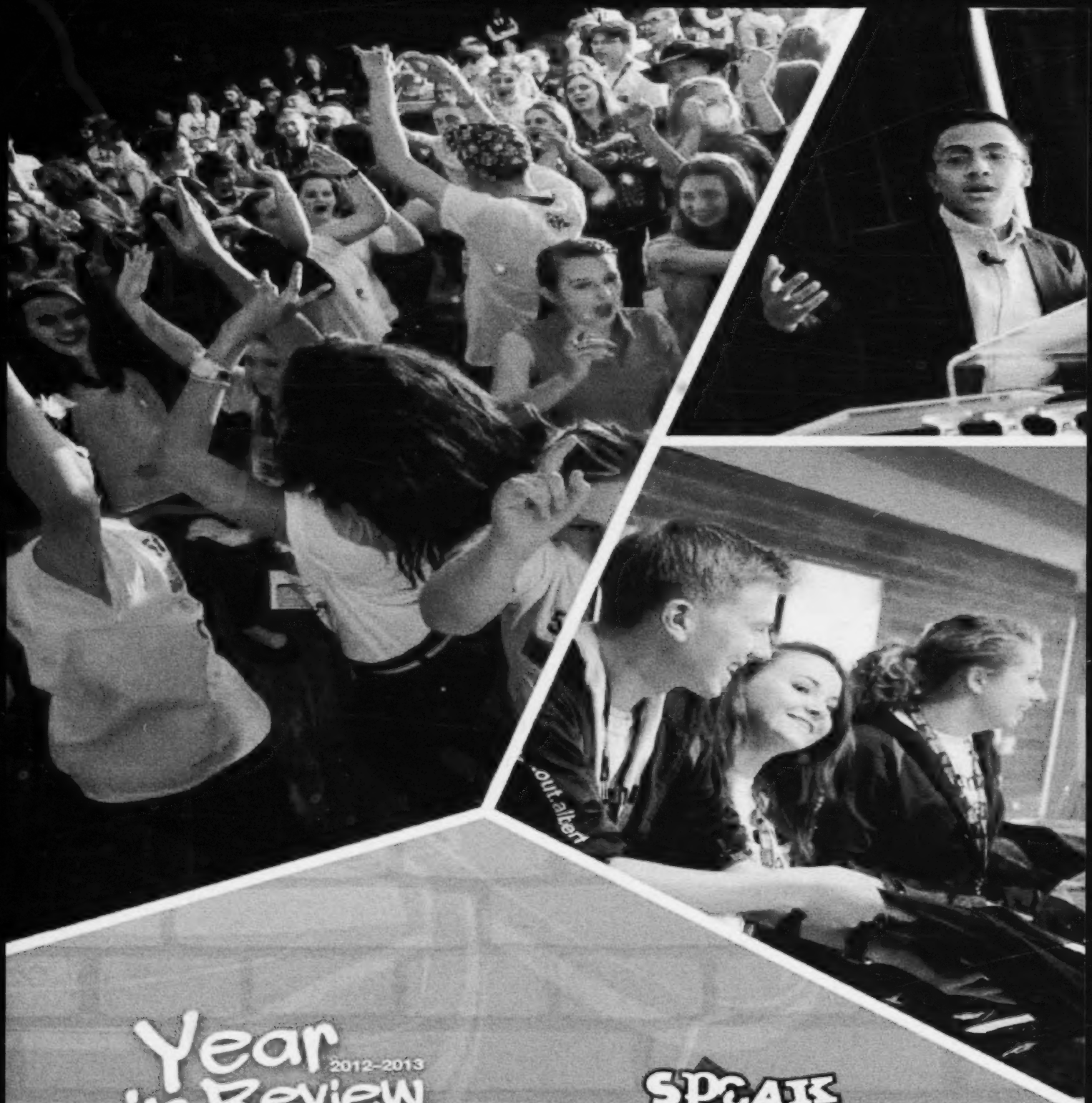
- The Alberta Premier's office
- The Minister of Education's office
- The Deputy Minister of Education's office
- The People and Research Assistant Deputy Minister's office
- Alberta Education's executive team and Communications office

Additionally, we would like to recognize all of the contributions from other areas of Alberta Education, as well as from other ministries and youth engagement initiatives. These groups have played an integral role in the ongoing development of the student engagement initiative; together, we will effect change in Alberta's education system and, most importantly, improve the student experience:

- Alberta Alcohol Strategy
- Alberta Education Distance Education Review Project
- Alberta Mentoring Partnership
- Alberta Teachers' Association
- Alberta Learning Information Service (ALIS)
- Assessment Sector
- Citizenship and Career Pathways
- Cross-Ministry Services
- Curriculum Standards and Stakeholder Engagement
- Diploma Programs
- Enterprise and Advanced Education
- Environment and Sustainable Resource Development
- Ever Active Schools
- First Nations, Métis and Inuit and Field Services
- French Language Education Services
- Health and Wellness
- High School Credentialing
- High School Completion
- Human Services
- Inclusive Learning Supports
- International Education Services
- IT Business Planning and Support
- Learning Resource Centre
- Mathematics, Arts and Communication
- Policy and Planning
- School Research and Improvement
- School Technology
- Sciences and Wellness Branch
- Workforce Planning and Development

**"Les écoles de l'Alberta ont des défis unique et spécifique à chaque école. Exprime-toi te donne la chance de faire des vrai changement pertinent à ton éducation. Alors, c'est à ton tour : Exprime-toi »**
**(Translation : "Alberta school's all have unique and specific challenges. *Speak Out* gives you the chance to make real and significant changes to your education. So, it's your turn: *Speak Out*!" – Council member**

Last, but not least, we would like to thank the students of Alberta. Whether it is contributed through the Minister's Student Advisory Council, or via the website, forums or annual conference, student voice is what drives the Student Engagement Initiative. The feedback and input we receive from students inform our priority action items. We are thankful for all the direct and informative input from students throughout the year and their participation in numerous Alberta Education initiatives and events.




# Year in Review 2012-2013

SPEAK OUT

ALBERTA STUDENT ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE

Alberta Government

www.speakout.alberta.ca